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From time to time I see or hear something that I think is worth sharing. This blog serves this purpose. It is an ongoing work in progress that I will add to from time to time.

My hope is that what interests and shapes me personally and professionally may be of interest to others. If something I share resonates for you, I welcome your contributions and feedback.

19 September 2018

The ordinary, everyday ways punishment culture can undermine care

This Blog post describes two recent personal examples that highlight the ways in which a culture of punishment can infiltrate attempts meant to foster care and support.

When I encounter these kinds of situations, and they are surprisingly frequent, I usually experience a range of responses including sadness, concern and annoyance. Sadness, because these situations continue to recur seemingly without awareness of the potential effects. Concern, because these effects are potentially serious and can significantly undermine health and wellbeing. Annoyed, not with those who make the comments, but with the enduring cultural sanctioning of punishment measures that enable them to continue to wreak havoc in people’s lives.

This blog attempts to expose some of the ways that punishment infiltrates situations which are intended to generate care and support. In particular, the focus is on the weapons that a culture of punishment has available in its arsenal. These are shame, blame and judgement and are often wielded in ways that undermine care and support. Having spent more than 25 years in the Counselling profession, I can say with some assurance that shaming, blaming and judgment are unlikely to contribute much to mana enhancement or wellbeing. In fact, they stand more chance of contributing to demoralisation and diminishment.

Shame, blame and judgement are often wielded in ways that undermine care and support

Here are two examples where punishment and its weapons infiltrate day-to-day interactions and relationships in unassuming but troubling ways.

Example 1

A group in my local community, founded to encourage environmental care and protection, and one with which I proudly associate, put a message on social media asking people to cast judgement on the following:
Who do you think is at fault? 1. The people who drop litter or, 2. The companies that make single-use packaging on items we buy? This, to me, is a group with worthy and charitable intentions unintentionally inciting shame, blame and judgment.

Shaming, blaming and judgment are unlikely to contribute to mana enhancement or wellbeing.

Example 2

I regularly encounter social media messages aimed at raising awareness of mental health and suicide. They come with an expectation that I will circulate these, through my networks by using ‘like’ and ‘share’ functions. Yet, these messages too often point out that only a very small percentage of readers will care enough to read the entire message and bother to pass them on. Implicit in this is the idea that if you read and pass on you belong to the very exclusive 5%-10% of the population who care. Such messages, circulated in the name of care and support, simultaneously incite judgement, blame and shame on the other 90-95%. And so the cycle continues.

As I write this, I am aware of the potential for me to contribute to this cycle. Exposing these examples, comes with the risk that those who create and circulate these messages may experience shame, blame and judgment. I hope not. My hope is that in highlighting these practices, I am not taking the moral high ground and instead sharing some hard-won learning that I am still working at refining in my own life. I highlight them because they are often taken-for-granted and invisible. Making them visible makes it possible to attend to them.

Raising awareness helps make it possible for weapons of shame, blame and judgement to be identified and managed more mindfully. In so doing, competitive, divisive and abusive treatment of fellow human beings can be lessened. The examples may illustrate seemingly small violations but when widely circulated the collective and incremental harm can be significant for those they target.

The collective and incremental harm can be significant when seemingly small violations are widely circulated.

With awareness of punishment and its weapons lurking in our lives through our thoughts, emotions, expressions, media, social mores and other means we can decide whether to lay down these weapons and engage in more care and support. After-all, to what extent can punishment, judgment, shame and blame enhance relationships and personal identities? What kind of culture do they create?

To what extent can punishment, judgment, shame and blame enhance relationships and personal identities?

So what can be done? Hopefully, awareness can be generated without producing more blame, shame and judgement in the process. This is something I am working to refine.

Perhaps judgy, shamy, blamy bits can be edited out before ‘liking’, ‘sharing’ and publishing. This way the caring and supportive bits can get widely circulated without being undermined.
What does this have to do with leadership and organisational culture? Everything. Messages like those I have illustrated are widely circulated in organisations through all means of communication and they impact on organisational culture and staff health and wellbeing. How might a spirit of care and support be more alive in your personal and organisational relationships?

I welcome your thoughts and suggestions?

Adventurous Conversations Ltd work with organisations to develop values driven, people centred, relational and collaborative culture and relationships. Call, email, or book a no obligation 30-minute introductory consultation if you want to turn the tide towards more relational organisational culture and approaches.

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